The twenty-three papers in this second volume from the proceedings of the Second International Conference on Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church, held at Sydney in January 1999 under the auspices of the Centre for Early Christian Studies, Australian Catholic University, comprise as fine a scholarly collection of essays on patristic themes as one might find anywhere. The papers cover a wide range of Fathers and topics—both eastern and western and from both early and late patristic periods—although their general theme, as it was for the conference itself, is that of prayer and spirituality. This theme is for the most part broadly interpreted, and it may appear to some readers that several of the papers fit into the confines of that theme only on the most general possible interpretation of spirituality in particular. It is worth noting, though I do not do so by way of particular criticism, that one of the seven sections in this collection—section 2—is headed ‘Prayer and Spirituality’. This does seem unusual, given that the title of the whole collection is Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church, and may well reflect a recognition by the editors that many of the papers in the other six sections—though section 7 is admittedly headed ‘Living Spirituality’ (one essay only)—may not exactly fit, in a narrow sense (though I do not actually believe that to be the case for many of them), under such a particular heading.

The papers vary in both content and quality, though none in the collection would be regarded as ranking below the category at least of ‘interesting’. Some, indeed most of the essays, evidence high-quality scholarship. All, in my view, without exception, make useful contributions to their own particular fields of debate and conversation. Foremost among these, for me, are the following: the paper by Coyle on the question of what constituted prayer for early Christians, with attention being given to the particular contexts and backgrounds, Jewish and pagan, in which the ideas of specific Christian prayer developed—and with particular attention being given to both Clement of Alexandria and Origen; McGuckin’s erudite offering on the Prayer of the Heart in the patristic and the early Byzantine tradition, particularly the Syrian, Belda’s compact essay on the concept of continual prayer in John Cassian; Casanova’s illuminating treatment of the question of the Mother’s Prayer of Gregory of Nazianzus; Neil’s well-argued essay on Augustine’s conception of the ascent of the soul; Trevett’s (as always) fine paper on angelic visitations and Nanas of Kotiaeion; Hallman’s scholarly exposition on (the often sadly ignored) Theodoret and the Christology of Antioch—perhaps my favourite; and Allen’s own clear and thoughtful treatment of Severus of Antioch and the matter of pastoral care. Manion’s paper on the early illuminated Gospel Book, Harley’s on crucifixion amulets of the Early Christian period, and Lloyd’s on the rebuilding and decoration of the Church of San Clemente in Rome are of a different genre, though entirely appropriate to the general theme of the collection, and valuable contributions in their own right. They lead us away from an inappropriate and ultimately unhealthy preoccupation with texts alone as source material.

There are probably two main target audiences for this collection. The first is those students and professional scholars who are interested particularly in the question of prayer and spirituality in the early church. Such persons, though they may find some of the papers
particularly relevant to their immediate concerns, will, however, not be disappointed. The second is those for whom such a theme as the collection claims to represent is not particularly of interest but who will yet find here a veritable treasure of scholarly reflections on figures and topics from the early church, both those well known and those obscure (to the general scholar or student), from which to pick, to taste, and then to digest. This group, and I would number myself among them, will return to this collection again and again with great profit.